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ABSTRACT

Teacher interventions in the spontaneous arguments of seven preschoolers 3 to 5 years of age were analyzed. Twenty hours of data were audiotaped over a 3-month period in a small, church-affiliated private school while children were involved in free play and classroom activities. Interactions that might be taken as arguments were first transcribed and then categorized in terms of content and structure. Content categories were Possession, Number, Conduct, Truth, Role, Opposition to Request, and Exclusion. The structure of arguments was categorized as either simple or complex. Following Eisenberg and Garvey's definition of an adversative episode, researchers identified events antecedent to the arguments and initial oppositions. Resolutions of the arguments were not always clear, perhaps because of distractions introduced by children outside the arguing dyad or as a result of the teacher's intervention. It was found that the teacher intervened in 26% of the 189 arguments between children. She intervened most often during children's arguments concerning Possession or Opposition to Requests. In 13 of 19 instances (68%) the child who initiated the argument also sought intervention by the teacher. The initiator seemed to enhance his or her chances of winning the argument by appealing to authority. Conversational topic shifts indicated that children stopped arguing when the teacher intervened. (Author/RH)

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Teacher Intervention in Preschoolers' Arguments

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In this presentation I focus on a speech event, the argument, as it appears in the spontaneous speech of seven preschoolers, aged 3- to 5-years, in a nursery school setting. In an earlier study the structure and content of their arguments were analyzed. I address the topic of teacher intervention in the same arguments here.

Related Research

There is little literature related to children's arguments, also called quarrels, conflicts, and adversative episodes. Early investigators asked what nursery school children between the ages of 2- and 5-years argued about, how often they argued, and what the effect of arguments were on social development. Dawe (1934) analyzed 200 spontaneous quarrels in a thorough descriptive study of 40 children between 25- and 65-months. Children were observed during free play in nursery school. The average duration of a quarrel was 23 seconds; boys quarreled more than girls; quarrels decreased as children got older; and the majority of quarrels started over questions of object possession. Green (1933 a & b) focused on the relationship between preschoolers' friendships and quarreling and between the kind of group play and quarrels. One of her conclusions was that quarrels could be socially beneficial since they encouraged children to be "good sports."

The cognitive benefits of arguments or conflicts have been emphasized by Piagetians. Piaget (1959) points out the importance of children's social interactions in developing their ability to reason. His interest is in "genuine arguments" that occur only when a speaker can take the viewpoint of the listener and offer reasons or explanations to argue for fair solutions. According to Piaget, children are unlikely to have genuine arguments until age 7 or 8. In the Piagetian tradition, recent investigators

(e.g., Miller & Brownell, 1975; Botvin & Murray, 1975) have tested the effect of arguing on 6- to 9-year-olds' ability to conserve. Miller and Brownell found that conservers arguing in a conservation task with nonconservers are more persuasive than nonconservers. Botvin and Murray suggest that social conflicts or arguments over the solution to a conservation problem are no more effective in inducing conservation than is modeling.

In contrast, sociolinguists have been interested in children's arguments as a discourse phenomenon. Brenneis and Lein (1977) and Lein and Brenneis (1978) have done a comprehensive analysis of role-played arguments of first through eighth graders in three speech communities: white American, black American, and Fiji Indian. Children were asked to argue about "whose ball it is" and "who is the strongest or smartest." The investigators analyzed prosodic features, sequencing, and content of the arguments and concluded that role-played arguments in all three groups of children share common elements. Arguments did not represent a breakdown in communication but, instead, were rule-governed and cooperatively constructed by participants.

Most relevant to the focus of this study is the investigation of spontaneous arguments by Eisenberg and Garvey (in press) and Boggs (1978). Because our analysis builds on their studies, their analytic methods are presented in some detail. Like Brenneis and Lein, Eisenberg and Garvey recorded arguments of dyads who were videotaped in a laboratory playroom. The 108 subjects in the latter study, however, were of preschool age, ranging from 2 years, 10 months to 5 years, 7 months. Eisenberg and Garvey were concerned with sequencing of discourse within a particular context, which they called an adversative episode or conflict. This was defined as "the interaction

which grows out of an opposition to a request for action, an assertion, or an action" (p. 3). The episode ends with a resolution of conflict, and resolution is the interactive goal.

The uniqueness of Eisenberg and Garvey's analysis was its focus on the resolution of conflict and on the strategies by which children reach resolutions. Unlike Brenneis and Lein (1977) and Boggs (1978), who viewed arguments as cultural conventions or routines, Eisenberg and Garvey treated an argument primarily as a problem that is jointly solved through discourse and, secondarily, as an interactive ritual. Their perspective was both sociolinguistic and Piagetian. Solutions to arguments could be analyzed as more or less adaptive, depending on how able a child is to take the viewpoint of the other and to reach a compromise.

According to Eisenberg and Garvey, the structure of a conflict can be described by the nature of the "initial opposition" (the utterance that begins the conflict) and the "strategies" that follow the opposition. Eisenberg and Garvey concluded that their preschool subjects did not rely only on simple strategies, such as repetition or insistence. They also used reasons and requested explanations or justifications for behavior. More than any other, the strategy of giving reasons led to the successful termination of conflicts.

Boggs (1978) presented another view of sequencing in part-Hawaiian children's arguments. Although he focused on a "contradicting routine," his data seemed similar to ours, perhaps because the disputes were recorded in naturalistic group situations. Among 4- and 5-year-olds, the contradicting routine was simple in structure and initiated by one child saying, "Not!" The simplest and most common sequence for Boggs' corpus was what he termed Sequence I:

assertion, claim, or allegation → (followed by) contradiction →
repetition of assertion, claim or allegation

or

supporting argument, allegation, or appeal to authority.

Sequence I may be followed by Sequence II:

(Sequence I →) challenge → supporting argument, allegation, or appeal to authority.

Either Sequence I or II may be followed by Sequence III:

(Sequence I or II →) insult → counter-insult, threat or trial

(Boggs, pp. 330-332)

In the data for 4- and 5-year-olds, claims on desired objects, status, or an attribute (e.g., age) often led to a contradiction. Exclaiming, "Not!," seemed to be a stylized response that initiated a serious dispute. Children seldom resolved the resulting conflict satisfactorily although older children (10 to 11-year-olds) seemed to end disputes by joking and laughing. Boggs concluded that part-Hawaiian children develop the ability to engage in the contradicting routine as a playful exchange and that adults induct children into the routine by teasing them at an early age.

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study were audiotaped in a small, church-affiliated private school in Austin, Texas, for eight white middle-class 3- to 5-year-olds. Parents of the children were college-educated and professionals. We chose this small group so that it would be possible to record an appreciable amount of talk from all children and the teacher without the excessive background noise that a larger classroom might have. There were three girls and five boys. Ages at the beginning of data collection were: Tessa, 5 years;

Jennifer, 5 years; Lee, 4 years; Billy, 5 years, Rhett, 4 years, John, 3 years, Stewart, 3 years; and Tom, 3 years. Tom was often absent and seldom spoke when present so that analyses were based on the arguments of the seven other children. The teacher was a woman who had previously taught in preschools and kindergartens for 10 years.

One observer, a graduate student, in early childhood education, audiotaped most of the 20 hours of data over a 3-month period. The second assistant, a graduate student in linguistics, made occasional visits to familiarize herself with the children as she transcribed the audiotapes. The group of children met twice a week, and recordings were made in the morning when children were most active and talkative. In general, audiotapes were made of these activities: free play, in which children could select among several activities, a teacher-directed lesson that lasted from 10- to 15-minutes; clean-up time; singing; and snacks. The bulk of the children's time was spent in free play.

The main observer focused on one child at a time or on the teacher for 30-minute segments. Her recording equipment consisted of a Sony TC-142 cassette tape-recorder and a unidirectional microphone, placed on a Sony PBR-330 parabolic disc to eliminate as much background noise as possible. She took notes on the context of talk as well as on concurrent nonverbal behaviors, and was an unobtrusive observer, not a participant observer. Although the classroom was small (less than 400 sq. ft.), children's behavior seemed to be unaffected by the observer's presence and by the use of recording equipment.

Data Analysis

The interactions that might be defined as arguments, along with interactions that seemed relevant to the arguments and their interpretations,

were transcribed by the second assistant. Our criterion for an argument was derived from Eisenberg and Garvey's definition of an adversative episode as an interaction that grows out of opposition to a request for action, an assertion, or an action. According to their definition, an argument has three essential parts: an antecedent event, an initial opposition, and a resolution. The following, then, would be an argument:

A: That's mine. (antecedent event)
B: No, it's not. (initial opposition)
A: Oh, OK. (resolution)

In our data, we identified the antecedent events as well as the initial oppositions, but resolutions were not always clear. Our arguments could consist of two turns, an antecedent event followed by an initial opposition. There are two possible reasons for a lack of resolutions in our corpus. One may have been our use of audiotape only. No video-record of nonverbal resolutions was available (e.g., a child hands something to another child to resolve a conflict). The more powerful reason for the small number of resolutions is the nature of the situation in which data were collected. In Eisenberg and Garvey's study, dyads were videotaped in a playroom. The investigators pointed out that a resolution was necessary because interaction between the pair could not continue without one. In our naturalistic classroom setting, arguments tended to become diffused because of distractions from children outside the arguing dyad or because of the teacher's intervention.

All arguments were than categorized by content and structure. Arguments with simple structures were separated from those that were complex. Simple arguments were essentially repetitious. Once the initial opposition occurred, speakers added no new information to the argument. Our definition of a complex argument was one that included an acceptance, appeal to

authority, compromise, or supporting argument. These kinds of utterances were complex because they indicated that children were attempting a resolution. Instead of repeating themselves, they tried to go beyond the stalemate, add supportive information, or end the argument. Details of categories for analysis are presented elsewhere (Genishi & Di Paolo, in press).

Results

Structure and Content

There were 189 arguments in 10.5 hours of audiotape, the recordings in which children, not the teacher, were the focus. The mean number of arguments per half hour was nine; the range per half hour was one to 17. Results of the analysis of structure and content are summarized briefly here. (See Genishi & Di Paolo, in press, for details.) We identified seven major themes, including Possession, which occurred most frequently, and Number (see Table 1). The arguments in which children used cardinal numbers were the best evidence of their integration of academic and social knowledge. The majority (148) of arguments were simple in structure. Whether arguments were simple (repetitious) or complex (containing attempts to end or resolve the conflict), children seemed to have two equally important goals in arguing: to control the behavior of others and to assert their own importance. Resolution of the argument did not seem primary.

Teacher Intervention in Arguments

Implicit in the developmental literature on children's interactions with each other (Rubin, 1980; Damon, 1977) is the view that free of adult intervention, children benefit from opportunities to resolve their own arguments. In the present study the teacher stated her belief that talking about and through conflicts was appropriate and of social benefit. We

might expect her, then, to avoid participating in arguments. However, she did intervene at times to resolve them. An analysis was done to see whether she impeded children's resolutions. The questions addressed were:

1. How many times did the teacher intervene in children's arguments?
2. During what kinds of arguments did the teacher intervene?
3. Was her intervention solicited by children?
4. What were the consequences of intervention to the children involved?

Teacher intervention was defined as the teacher's verbal participation during an argument. The teacher, Ms. Cramer, intervened in 49 of the 189 arguments, or slightly more than one-fourth the total number (26%). She did not, therefore, verbally interfere the majority of the time with the development of children's arguments or resolutions.

The next question of interest was, during what kinds of arguments did Ms. Cramer intervene? Table 2 shows the frequency of intervention for each argument category. She intervened most often during children's arguments over Possession, or in 61% (30) of the arguments containing teacher intervention. Examples of these arguments, which were often preceded by a child's action, follow:

(1) Possession

(Rhett sits in Billy's chair.)

Billy: Hey! That was my chair. I got it first.
Ms. C.: Rhett, that <u>was</u> Billy's chair.

(2) Possession

(Tracy takes glue container.)

Jennifer: Hey, that's my glue.
Lee: Well, I didn't get any glue!
Ms. C.: You know what? We have lots of glue.
Jennifer: Did too!
Lee: I know, and you (unclear) them away.

These two examples are typical of the arguments over possession; they involve ownership of an object and are simple in structure.

An example of an argument based on an Opposition to a Request is:

(3) Opposition to a request

(Stewart crawls into the doll's bed.)

Jennifer:	You're breaking it! Tessa! Stewart, you're breaking (on?) the baby bed!
John:	You're gonna break it!
Jennifer:	Teacher.
Stewart:	Knock, knock.
John:	You're gonna break it.
Ms. C.:	John, John! Let him do it by himself.
John:	Get out.
Ms. C.:	You'll hurt him and (unclear).
John:	He can't -- he can't be in this.
Stewart:	Knock, knock.
Ms. C.:	No, let's don't play in it. You might break it.

In example 3 Jennifer solicits the teacher's intervention by saying, "Teacher," presumably expecting Ms. Cramer to force Stewart's compliance. In answer to the third question about solicited intervention, we note that Jennifer and Lee invited Ms. Cramer's participation more than the other children. Each girl had four solicitations so that together they accounted for almost half of all solicitations (eight of 19). Table 3 shows the number of times each child initiated an argument (i.e., contributed the initial opposition) in which the teacher intervened and the number of each child's solicitations during those arguments. In 13 of 19 instances (68%) the child who initiated also sought Ms. Cramer's intervention. The initiator seemed to enhance his/her chances of winning the argument by appealing to authority.

The total number (49) of arguments containing interventions is not large so that little can be said reliably about individual differences, but Jennifer is notable for the number of arguments initiated (14 of 49). Lee and John initiated nine arguments each although John sought teacher

intervention only once. Billy initiated relatively few arguments (six) but proportionately solicited the teacher's help the most (three of six). In summary, these children verbally asked for the teacher's help in less than half the instances when they could have (19 of 49). Children may have obtained Ms. Cramer's help nonverbally through eye contact, etc., but in most of the cases we recorded the teacher voluntarily intervened.

Discussion

The fourth question regarding the consequences of the teacher's intervention to the children and their arguments is discussed in this section. Because there is no video-record of behaviors, we cannot say whether children always complied with Ms. Cramer's suggestions. Conversational topic shifts indicated that children stopped arguing so that the intervention seemed to have a clear effect. Ms. Cramer suggested compromises ("You know what? There are lots of glues "), supported children's claims ("That was Billy's chair "), or requested that children argue verbally and not physically ("Talk about it "). In all cases she attempted either to induce a resolution or, more often, to provide the resolution. She did, then, prevent the children from reaching their own solutions in these 49 arguments.

Three things seem significant: first, that Ms. Cramer intervened in only 26% of all recorded arguments; second, that she intervened primarily during those arguments about Possession or Oppositions to Requests. She intervened in very few arguments in the five other categories. The most substantive categories from an adult perspective are Number and Truth, and she intervened in only four of 53 of these. It is likely that in these cases children were not prevented from working out resolutions on their own or from showing what they knew (as in the arguments involving

cardinal numbers).

Third, the children had few (41 of 189) arguments that contained even the beginning of resolutions (i.e., appeals to authority, supporting arguments, or compromises). In our earlier study we suggested that situational factors may have contributed to the small number of resolutions. Children could be distracted by events unrelated to their arguments; they could walk away from each other to end an argument; or they could rely on the teacher to formulate a solution. The results of the present analysis lead to the conclusion that they did not depend on the teacher's intervention. Since in 74% of the arguments the teacher did not intervene, her participation may have been generally irrelevant to resolutions they might have reached.

In Eisenberg and Garvey's study (in press), children interacted in dyads and reached resolutions frequently. Dyadic interaction is more likely to lead to children's own resolutions since children placed in dyads with no adult present may feel compelled to resolve arguments verbally so that interaction can continue. An implication for practice is that settings, rather than developmental differences alone, may determine the nature of arguments children have. The preschool we studied was held in a small room, which was ample for eight children. A larger space with more discrete sections might allow for two or three children to interact privately. Teachers could thus enhance children's opportunities to argue about matters other than possession and to reach their own solutions, out of hearing range of the teacher and other children.

In summary, the teacher in this preschool intervened in a small proportion (26%) of arguments. The seven children could argue independent of the teacher although they seldom terminated arguments by resolving them.

An earlier analysis showed that children were occasionally able to support each other, or verbally take sides in a conflict. Our data, then, might provide a developmental baseline for comparison with those of Wilkinson (in press) and Cooper (in press) who include older children in their studies. We would expect to see more peer support and cooperation as subjects' developmental level changes.

Two other issues that are relevant to this study are also relevant to the Wilkinson and Cooper studies: effectiveness in communicating and the overlap between task and social dimensions in interaction. We could say that young children are ineffective in communicating because they sometimes fail "to obtain compliance from listeners" (Wilkinson's definition of effectiveness). From the adult's or teacher's point of view, effectiveness in arguments is a matter of obtaining compliance verbally on one's own. From the child's point of view, however, effectiveness might simply be obtaining compliance, or getting what s/he wants. In a situation where the teacher is present, one effective course of action is to let the person with authority intervene. The result of intervention, then, may be compliance with the child's wishes.

The issue regarding task and social dimensions is also one that varies, depending on children's developmental level, as well as their situations. In our data, the children were preoccupied with the social dimension: they sought to regulate others' behavior and to assert their own importance. The task of resolving an argument was not primary. Both Cooper and Wilkinson study primary grade classrooms where teachers, unlike the preschool teacher of my study, set academic tasks for the children. We would expect to see a shift in emphasis toward the task dimension and away from the social. In all cases, however, the two dimensions are inseparable and together inform our study of effective communication.

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TABLE 1

Frequency of Occurrence of Major Themes in Arguments

	n	%
Possession	59	31
Number	29	15
Conduct	28	15
Truth	24	13
Role	22	11.5
Opposition to Request	22	11.5
Exclusion	5	3
Total	189	100

TABLE 2

Frequency of Occurrence of Teacher Intervention

Major Theme	n	%
Possession	30	61
Number	1	2
Conduct	1	2
Truth	3	6
Role	0	0
Opposition to Request	13	27
Exclusion	1	2
Total	49	100

TABLE 3

Frequency of Children's Initiation and Solicitation

Child	Arguments Initiated	Solicitations in Arguments Initiated	% Solicitations/ Initiations
Billy	6	3	50
Jennifer	14	4	29
John	9	1	11
Lee	9	4	44
Rhett	4	0	0
Stewart	2	0	0
Tessa	5	1	20
Total	49	13	26